

**Comments on Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide**  
Before the House Committee on Commerce  
Subcommittee on Health and Environment

6 March 1997

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Since our church body's first statement on the value of human life in 1972, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has consistently maintained and promoted the teaching of the Word of God: All human life is the gift of God, and has a unique and intrinsic value that is not diminished by age, health, or condition of life.

In 1982 our church was recognized for its long-standing commitment to life when the *Saturday Evening Post* credited us with the strongest pro-life position of any denomination. We have continued in that commitment in recent years; our church in convention has passed numerous resolutions affirming our on-going commitment to the value of life as a gift of God. In our 1992 statement on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide we say, in part:

Each person, no matter how infirm and socially useless he or she may appear to be, deserves to be accepted as a being created in the image of God;<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Resolution 3-11A "To Reaffirm Synod's Position on Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide" Convention Proceedings, 58th Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Pittsburgh, Pa., July 10-17, 1992, pp. 116-117. These comments in the resolution are themselves a reaffirmation of the "Report on Euthanasia With Guiding Principles: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod as prepared by its Social Concerns Committee," October, 1979. These principles were reaffirmed in the report "Christian Care at Life's End: A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod," February, 1993. The understanding of the Synod on the issue of the value of human life is further reaffirmed in Resolution 6-01B "To Affirm Sanctity of Life Position" and Resolution 6-02 "To Speak Out against Legalization of Assisted Suicide" in the Synod's most recent (1995) convention. The text of Resolution 6-02 is appended to these comments.

and

The spiritual and moral questions raised by the issue of euthanasia are of such a nature that their evaluation is an enterprise touching on the very survival of the basic principles which undergird the integrity of our Christian faith and the survival of our cultural heritage. They constitute the primary spiritual and moral crucible of this age.<sup>2</sup>

Most recently, the president of our church body has established a commission on the sanctity of life, which has just produced a document entitled "That They May Have Life" which focuses on these issues, and which was mailed at the beginning of this week to each of your offices. In that statement we say:

Human life is not an achievement. It is an endowment. It has measureless value, because every individual, at every stage of development and every state of consciousness, is known and loved by God. This is the source of human dignity and the basis for human equality. It must therefore be asserted without exception or qualification: No one is worthless whom God has created and for whom Christ died.<sup>3</sup>

This is not the view of Lutherans alone, but represents the historic tradition of the whole Christian Church.

As a church body that recognizes the God-given role of government to restrain evil and to promote good for all persons—even those who do not share our faith or any faith—we hasten to emphasize that the affirmation of the value of human life is not a religious tenet only, but also the central moral tenet of our civilization. Because we, as a society, affirm the value of each human life, we have adopted a political structure that secures the liberty of the individual. Because we affirm the value of each human life we, as a society, assert that every person has an inherent right to live, to have liberty, to acquire and manage

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> "That They May Have Life," The President's Commission on the Sanctity of Life, The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, 1333 Kirkwood Road, St. Louis, Mo. 63122-7295, 1997, p.1.

property, to hold and to assert the dictates of his conscience, and to worship God according to his faith. Because we affirm the value of every human life we, as a society, have pursued the mysteries of the physical universe and the medical arts in order to enhance the life which we hold dear. In short, all that is good in our culture and society has grown from our conviction that human life is a good to be valued, sustained, and nourished.

By contrast, we have condemned as evil those things which demean and diminish the value of human life. In the past we condemned slavery as immoral because it diminished the value of human life by equating one's personal worth to his value as an economic commodity. We have condemned communism as immoral because it reduced the value of human life by declaring the individual to be nothing but a pawn in the inexorable and inevitable tide of an historical process. Today we must condemn euthanasia and assisted suicide as evil because they reduce the value of human life by equating one's personal worth to the measure of one's utility. These practices promote the idea that when life is no longer useful (either to one's self or to society) it can be disposed of with no more loss than an old pair of shoes. This we certainly and vigorously oppose.

The broad questions of euthanasia and assisted suicide raise other subsidiary issues as well. Among the most important of these are the danger that may arise from forcing someone with a reduced capacity for judgement to make an irrevocable decision to seek his own death; the value of suffering and death as an opportunity for the individual to reflect of the meaning of life, and as a opportunity for others to learn how to care for their neighbor; and the difficulty of compromising the fundamental trust which the infirm must have in those who provide for their care.

Much of the discussion surrounding the desire of some to seek their own deaths reflects the desire to avoid pain and suffering. You will all have heard the surveys which indicate that the majority of those who contemplate seeking their own death are suffering from treatable clinical depression. You will also have heard from other witnesses that medical science has made many advances in the field of palliative care, so that it can in large measure relieve the fear of pain and suffering at the approach of death. There is considerable scope for abuse

in any system that would allow those who are suffering from the diminished judgment that can accompany clinical depression, and who may be unaware of the medical advances that could relieve their pain and calm their fears, to make a final and irrevocable decision to end their own life.

While we laud medical developments which may reduce the suffering and pain that may accompany the approach of death, we, as a community of care-givers and care-receivers, need to learn once again the positive value which suffering can have for the individual and the society. Some of life's most profound moments of self-discovery come as one endures suffering and faces death. Enduring suffering and facing death we learn valuable lessons about the meaning of life which we can, and should, pass on to others. To cut this process short is to rob the individual of the opportunity for the most profound personal reflection, but it is also to deprive others of the wisdom and the inspiration which they may acquire through our suffering.

Moreover, to shorten the end of life by artificial means deprives all of us the opportunity to care for others, and to be cared for. We have seen, in our society, the effects of a diminished mutual commitment to care for others. Many have commented on the increasing insensitivity which large segments of our society display toward others. It is no accident that this diminished capacity to care for others has coincided with the increased institutionalization of suffering and death in our society. With fewer opportunities to learn to care for others, we are, as a society, in danger of losing the ability to care.

In addition to the fundamental questions of the value which our culture places on human life, and on suffering, we must also recognize the practical problems which arise from re-defining the role of the physician from that of care-giver to that of death-deliverer. This, combined with the economic incentive for insurance providers to terminate life rather than provide end-of-life care, raises legitimate and far-reaching practical concerns for the patient. Those who approach the end of life need to have every confidence that their physician will do everything in his power to heal them or, if they are beyond healing, to relieve their pain and suffering as they prepare for the end of life. To cast doubt upon this

relationship, to force the elderly and the infirm to question the intent and trustworthiness of those who care for them, is to undermine the patient-doctor relationship, and to cause needless fear in those who are already dealing with some of life's most difficult concerns.

On Tuesday of this week, President Clinton, though speaking on another subject, reminded us of an important truth when he said, "Each human life is unique, born of a miracle that reaches beyond laboratory science. I believe that we must respect this profound gift."<sup>4</sup> He also reminded us of the dangers of trying to play God with the beginning of life. His words apply equally well to the end of life. We must respect this profound gift as it draws to a close no less than we must respect it as it begins. We must avoid playing God by artificially ending life just as we must avoid playing God by artificially beginning it.

For all of these reasons together we oppose any effort not only to legalize euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, but especially to promote it by allowing government funds to be used for such purposes. I said a few moments ago that we in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod believe that government has a God-given role to restrain evil and to promote good. For the government to allow the devaluing of human life in any form is a great evil; for the government to promote it can lead to nothing less than the assisted-suicide of all the values which we as a society cherish.

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<sup>4</sup> "Remarks by the President on Cloning," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, March 4, 1997.

## Addendum 1

"Guiding Principles" from the 1979 *Report on Euthanasia* from the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (subsequently reaffirmed by conventions of the Synod):

1. Euthanasia, in its proper sense, is a synonym for mercy killing, which involves suicide and/or murder. It is, therefore, contrary to God's Law.
2. As Creator, God alone knows with certainty whether a disease or an injury is incurable.
3. When the God-given powers of the body to sustain its own Life can no longer function and doctors in their professional judgment conclude that there is no real hope for recovery even with life-support instruments, a Christian may in good conscience "let nature take its course."
4. Administering pain-killing medications, even at the risk of shortening life, is permissible, since this does not entail the choice of death as either a means or an end.
5. It is good ethical procedure for the doctor to request and receive a statement signed by the patient, if competent to consent, or by the nearest of kin, agreeing to the uselessness of further "heroic efforts" and consenting to termination of treatments.
6. Each person, no matter how infirm and socially useless he or she may appear to be, deserves to be accepted as a being created in the image of God.
7. While suffering is an intrusion into life, it provides the opportunity for Christian witness and service.
8. Often the time prior to death is so wrapped in mystery that no one ought forcibly to interrupt the movement of man's spirit as it may be communicating through God's Spirit with his Creator and Redeemer by way of responding in trust and inner yearning.

9. Death is not merely a physical but a crucial spiritual event for each person.
10. Any decisions made in this highly complex area, and any actions taken that may later appear to have been wrong, have been redeemed by that forgiveness which is available to all who put their trust in the work and merits of mankind's Savior and Redeemer.
11. The spiritual and moral questions raised by the issue of euthanasia are of such a nature that their evaluation is an enterprise touching on the very survival of the basic principles which undergird the integrity of our Christian faith and the survival of our cultural heritage. They constitute the primary spiritual and moral crucible of this age.
12. Christians are obligated to make their position known, by whatever means possible, as a way of helping to shape public opinion on the question of euthanasia.

## **Addendum 2**

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod  
Convention Proceedings  
59th Regular Convention  
St. Louis, Mo. July 15-21, 1995  
pp. 141-142

### **To Speak Out against Legalization of Assisted Suicide**

#### **RESOLUTION 6-O2**

WHEREAS, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod affirms the sanctity of human life and recognizes the reality of human suffering; and

WHEREAS, Any attempt to legalize assisted suicide is an affront to the Lord, who gives life, and opens the door for abuse and future legislation that would deny the freedom of many; and

WHEREAS, Suffering and depression are also opportunities for helping, healing, encouragement, and hope through the Gospel; and

WHEREAS, Physicians in particular have a responsibility to sustain and promote life; and

WHEREAS, We respect the individual's right to refuse treatment or to forbid life-support systems by a prior directive and to be allowed to die; therefore be it

*Resolved*, That The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in convention express its objection to medical personnel having any part in actively inducing death, even at the patient's request or at the request of the family; and be it further

*Resolved*, That the Gospel be applied to situations of suffering and depression as opportunities to help, heal, encourage, and provide hope; and be it finally

*Resolved*, That the Synod speak out against any attempt to legalize physician-assisted suicide and encourage its pastors and people to do the same.